

Message Text

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ACTION AF-10

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C O N F I D E N T I A L CAPE TOWN 1159

DEPARTMENT ALSO PASS ICA

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PGOV, SOPN, SF
SUBJECT: SOUTH AFRICAN GOVERNMENT COMPLAINS ABOUT "ROOTS"

REF: (A) PRETORIA 2827, (B) JOHANNESBURG 1104

1. SOUTH AFRICAN DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS SECRETARY BRAND FOURIE CALLED ME IN JUNE 8 TO TALK ABOUT EMBASSY/ICA SHOWINGS OF FILM "ROOTS". HE SAID HE HAD BEEN ASKED BY THE CENSORSHIP BOARD TO PASS ON TO ME THE INFORMATION THAT IN TERMS OF SOUTH AFRICAN LAW, SPECIFICALLY THE PUBLICATIONS ACT OF 1974, "ROOTS" WOULD NOT QUALIFY TO BE SHOWN IN SOUTH AFRICA. IF SUBMITTED TO THE CENSORSHIP BOARD, IT WOULD NOT PASS. FOURIE SAID THE SAG HAD HAD THEIR LEGAL ADVISORS LOOK AT THE MATTER AND THEIR FEELING WAS THAT THE SHOWING OF "ROOTS" WOULD GENERATE GROUP HATRED. FOURIE MADE CLEAR THAT THERE WAS NOTHING THAT COULD BE DONE IF THE FILM WERE SHOWN ON US PREMISES, BUT THAT WHAT HE SAID WOULD APPLY IF THE FILM WERE SHOWN ON PREMISES NOT HAVING DIPLOMATIC IMMUNITY, E.G., IF IT WERE TO BE SHOWN IN CINEMAS OR OTHER PUBLIC PLACES.
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2. NOTING THAT THE BOOK "ROOTS" WAS ON SALE IN SA AND HAD BEEN SERIALIZED IN AT LEAST ONE SA NEWSPAPER, I ASKED IF THERE WERE ANY OTHER INSTANCES IN WHICH A FILM WAS DEEMED UNSUITABLE WHEN THE BOOK WAS NOT; ALSO WHETHER ANY OF THOSE MAKING THE DETERMINATION HE SPOKE OF HAD EVER SEEN THE FILM. HE ANSWERED THE FIRST QUESTION

AFFIRMATIVELY AND GAVE A VAGUE NEGATIVE ON THE LATTER POINT. HE SAID HE HAD NOT READ THE BOOK OR SEEN THE FILM AND DID NOT PROFESS TO KNOW THE TERMS OF THE PUBLICATIONS ACT BUT WAS SIMPLY PASSING ON THE JUDGMENT OF THE SA LEGAL EXPERTS.

3. I SAID THAT WE HAD SHOWN THE FILM, MOSTLY ON OUR OWN PREMISES, AS AN IMPORTANT FACET OF THE AMERICAN CULTURAL HERITAGE. I QUOTED TO HIM, FROM THE BROCHURE HANDED OUT AT THE SHOWINGS, VARIOUS PASSAGES IDENTIFYING "ROOTS" AS A PECULIARLY AMERICAN STORY WHICH HAS BEEN CRITICIZED IN A NUMBER OF WAYS BUT WHICH STILL DEPICTS A PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT PART, EMOTIONALLY, OF AMERICAN HISTORY, NOTING THAT IT HAD HAD A POSITIVE EFFECT ON RACE RELATIONS IN THE US. I ADDED THAT I KNEW OF NO EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT THE FEARS OF THE CENSORSHIP BOARD HAD BEEN TOLD BY MY STAFF THAT THE EFFECT OF THE FILM SEEMED TO BE GREATER UPON WHITE VIEWERS THAN BLACKS. WE HAD RECEIVED MANY FAVORABLE COMMENTS ABOUT OUR SHOWING THE FILM FROM WHITES AS WELL AS BLACKS. WE HAD FOUND A VERY STRONG INTEREST IN THE FILM AND HAVE BEEN TOLD BY MANY PEOPLE WHO MISSED EARLIER SHOWINGS THAT THEY WOULD LIKE TO SEE IT WHEN WE CAN GET IT BACK AGAIN DURING ITS WORLDWIDE CIRCUIT.

4. I POINTED OUT THAT THE ICA LEASE OF THE FILM DID NOT CONFIDENTIAL

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GIVE US AUTHORITY TO SHOW THE FILM IN CINEMAS OR ANYWHERE ELSE FOR COMMERCIAL PURPOSES AND THAT WE HAD SHOWN IT AT UNIVERSITY PREMISES IN NATAL ONLY AFTER GETTING SPECIFIC SPECIAL AUTHORIZATION.

5. COMMENT: I AVOIDED RAISING THE ISSUE OF WHETHER OR NOT WE CONSIDERED IT NECESSARY TO GET CENSORSHIP APPROVAL TO SHOW ANY FILMS OUTSIDE OUR OWN PREMISES. FOURIE NEVER ACTUALLY SAID SUCH APPROVAL HAD TO BE OBTAINED, ALTHOUGH THERE WAS A VERY CLEAR IMPLICATION THAT IT SHOULD BE. AT THE SAME TIME, IT IS POSSIBLE THAT NO PARTICULAR PROBLEM WOULD BE ENCOUNTERED IF A FILM WERE NOT IN ANY WAY CONTROVERSIAL OR POTENTIALLY "UNACCEPTABLE." I THOUGHT IT BEST NOT TO PRESS THE MATTER FURTHER OR TO GET INTO ANY DISCUSSION OF HOW WE DEFINE PREMISES WITH DIPLOMATIC IMMUNITY. FOURIE RAISED NO OBJECTION WHEN I SAID WE HOPED WE COULD GET THE FILM AGAIN. WHILE IT IS POSSIBLE HE WAS SIMPLY BEING CAREFUL TO MAKE CLEAR HIS RECOGNITION OF THE LEGAL IMMUNITY OF US PREMISES, HE GAVE THE IMPRESSION OF NOT BEING PERSONALLY CONCERNED ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY OF OUR SHOWING THE FILM ON EMBASSY OR ICA PREMISES. WHETHER SUCH AN ATTITUDE WOULD EXTEND

TO THE SOWETO READING ROOM, HOWEVER, IS A TOUGHER
QUESTION. THE PRIME MINISTER MADE IT CLEAR TO ME THE
OTHER DAY THAT HE CONSIDERED THE FILM DISTORTED AND
PROVOCATIVE. WE WILL THUS HAVE TO APPROACH ANY OPPORTUNITY
FOR FUTURE SHOWINGS WITH CONSIDERABLE CARE AND DISCRETION.
EDMONDSON

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